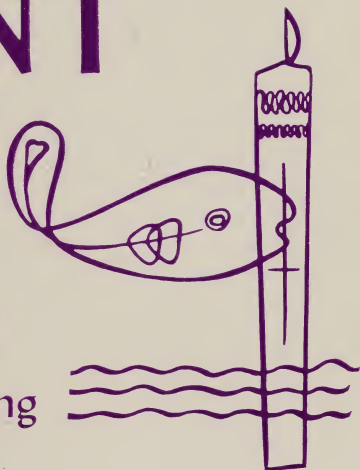


LENT

Its Purpose
and Meaning



LENT: ITS PURPOSE AND MEANING

We can, of course, begin afresh to try to be real Christians on any day and at any moment. But at the beginning of Lent each year, the Church gives us a special invitation for a special new beginning. In six weeks comes the annual re-enactment of the mysteries by which we were redeemed: Our Lord's Passion and Death and Resurrection. So the Church now invites us to prepare to be redeemed, as it were, all over again, to renew the grace we first received in Baptism.

Lent is the time, then, for us all to take new courage. For the Church herself will show us again this year how to be true Christians. If we prepare for Holy Week and Easter with her, we shall be caught up in the great stream of her effort to make everything ready once more for the new life Christ has won for us and gives us in a special way each year through the mysteries of Holy Week. For this is the Church's springtime. This is when Christ makes all things new.

The word "Lent" itself is the Old English word for "spring." Spring house-cleaning, new spring clothes, the feeling of new life and hope express a universal human reaction to the renewal of nature. The first warm winds, the first flowers and buds give us all an unaccountable hope and joy—unaccountable until we realize that spring is only a picture God gives us of what the Redemption means.

For men have always felt that spring was somehow

a new creation. And, when God redeemed the Hebrew people from their slavery in Egypt and commanded them to observe the Pasch, or Passover, the anniversary of this deliverance, in the springtime, He intensified its natural meaning. Spring became the time not only for the grateful celebration of the new life of nature, but also of the new life God gave His people by delivering them and making them His Own.

When Our Lord chose to die and rise again at this same Paschal season, He showed us that His redemption brings us the true and eternal springtime, the new creation and deliverance that will be forever new.

Let us, then, begin to prepare with the Church for Christ's newness, doing away with the "oldness" of sin and selfishness, and making ready for the new life of Christ's own love and joy.

I. Following Christ

The Church does not leave us to ourselves to make our preparations for Christ's springtime. For the Christian never has to rely on himself alone, he can always look for help to Christ and the Church. We are members of Christ's Mystical Body, with our Head and Leader Himself to guide us and give us His light and strength.

On the Sunday before Ash Wednesday, the Church shows us in the Gospel that our Lenten journey is to

be a following of Christ to His Passion and Death and Resurrection. "Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and all that has been written by the prophets about the Son of Man is to be accomplished. . ." On the First Sunday of Lent, we are shown how to begin our following of Christ. We are given the Gospel of His forty days of fasting and prayer in the desert, His temptation by the devil, and His victory. As on Good Friday He will conquer our death by His death, so now, He conquers our temptations with His own.

We all know to our sorrow that it is when we try to be especially patient, kind and self-restrained that we are tempted to be even more unkind and complaining than usual. Any special efforts at virtue always bring with them special temptations to the opposite—both from the reaction of fallen human nature, and from the devil himself. So in this same Mass of the First Sunday of Lent, the Church shows us how to be victorious. By following Christ, we are to share in His own trust in His heavenly Father's care. Psalm 90, used in all the chants of this Mass, is the battle-cry of our Lenten warfare: "My God, in Whom I trust!"

How are we to follow Christ during Lent? We are to follow Him in His *fasting*. He went without food for forty days and nights: we follow the Church's easy directions as to fast and abstinence, or, if we cannot do even this much, we go without something else in the way of food or drink or comfort. And this is a token, a sign, of a deeper and more difficult

doing-without. That is, ceasing to follow our own will, in order to follow His. Our Lord gives us the highest example of this in His agony in the garden when He prayed: "Not My will, but Thine be done." The Masses of Lent are full of descriptions of this spiritual "fasting," which for us means first of all to repent, to cease to do evil, to deal with others in justice and love, to be fully converted to the way of life that Christ gives us.

We follow our Lord in His forty days of *prayer*. For us, this means first of all taking part in the Mass as often as we can—every day if possible. In the Mass, we *gather together* as God's people, and so gain the courage and strength of our unity in Him. In the Mass, we *hear* from God Himself, through the readings (Lesson(s) or Epistle and Gospel) how to prepare ourselves for Holy Week and Easter. From the songs of the Mass (Introit, Tract or Gradual, Offertory and Communion verses) we learn how to respond to what God tells us. And from the Prayers (Collect, Secret and Post-Communion), we learn how to ask for what God wants us to ask. In the Mass, by the ministry of the priest, we offer to the Father with Christ His own great Act of gratitude, the Holy Sacrifice, and ourselves with it. This Act is the very work of our redemption, renewed upon the altar. And so, by taking part in it, we gain each day fresh grace to do away with sin and selfishness and to live the life of Christ. And, in the Mass we receive Christ Himself in Holy Communion, to unite

us with one another in our Lenten efforts, to strengthen us with His own strength.

If we cannot take part in the Mass every day, we can go through the Mass of each day in a Missal, offering ourselves in union with the Holy Sacrifice in our parish Church. And we should join Christ in His prayer often during the day by any formal or informal praying that is possible in our circumstances. The important thing is to be "with" Him as continually as we can.

And we are to follow Christ in His public life of *loving service to others*. He "went about doing good," and the Gospels of Lent show us many pictures of His doing so. We are to follow Him in this, both in the normal course of daily life, and by a special effort to *give alms* of money and time and effort. At least what we save by our fasting, we can give to those in need. And anyone who is lacking in money has something else he can give—companionship, attention, service, prayers.

But the Church is careful to teach us also how to go about our Lenten praying and fasting and almsgiving. The Masses of the early part of Lent show us that we are to do all this with common sense, happily, cheerfully, and unobtrusively. We all know how trying people are who complain about their difficulties in fasting, who are so irritable at giving up cigarettes that nobody can live with them; who grimly go to Lenten devotions when common sense or charity should keep them at home.

Let us ask Our Lord, then, for the grace to make this a happy Lent for ourselves and those around us. "Man does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." Let us ask Him to learn how to live by this bread. Then, when we come to the great mysteries of Holy Week, we shall be able more perfectly than ever before to follow Him through His Passion and Death to the glory of His Resurrection.

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Look up the passage (Genesis, 3) from which is taken the formula used at the distribution of ashes. Why is this appropriate? In the light of the prayers used for blessing the ashes, to what do we commit ourselves when we publicly receive them on our foreheads on Ash Wednesday?

2. In the light of the Lenten Readings up to the Second Sunday, what should a practical program for Lenten praying, fasting and almsgiving take into consideration?

3. What temptations in our daily lives are comparable to the three suggested to Our Lord by the devil? How do His answers show us how we should act?

2. From Darkness to Light

God has made light necessary for life, in physical fact. And so in all human thinking, light and life go together, as do darkness and death. Many of us have little experience of real darkness, for a modern house and modern cities are never completely dark except when the power fails. But then, especially if it happens in the wintertime, we are quickly initiated into the age-old feelings of mankind. Without light, it is difficult to carry on the simplest household task. We wonder uneasily what strange things may be happening, for we have heard of crimes taking place by night that would never be done by daylight. The darkness makes the house seem like a prison. And so we sit and wait for light to return. And when suddenly the light comes on—what relief and rejoicing. Then we realize why, outside the reaches of modern civilization, night with its darkness is the very shadow of death, and men eagerly await the dawn to bring them the light that means life.

Throughout Holy Scripture, God uses the experience of what light means to human beings to give us an idea of what He is and of what He wants to share with us. In the Old Testament, God appears in fire, and His Glory is His Presence among His people. But this was only the foreshadowing of Christ, “the true Light,” Whose “life is the light of men.”

During Lent the Church teaches us how to respond

to this Light which is our life. First we have to be made able to *see* the Light, for pride and selfishness can blind us so that we do not even know what the true Light is. By Baptism Christ first gave us our spiritual sight, (one of the early names for Baptism was Illumination) and He restores it by the Sacrament of Penance. And so in preparation for the Easter renewal of our baptismal "seeing," we try to purify the eyes of our hearts, to do away with the causes of our blindness, so that Christ may enlighten us with His grace. And that He can and will do so is shown us in the Gospels of His curing the physically blind, and curing them spiritually as well, so that they saw and followed Him.

But we are not only to see Christ's Light and to see everything else by its illumination. We ourselves are to be filled with it, so that we can enlighten others. Christ the Light went down into the darkness of human death, and rose again in the glory that was His by right as the Son of God. Thus He won for us the gift of His own light and glory. Adopted children of His Father, we are to be "children of the Light." As His members, we are to be one with Him: "you are the light of the world," He said to His disciples, and so to us. Our Lenten efforts then, are to do away with the hindrances that prevent us from being true children of the Light, a means to the illumination of our neighbors. For it certainly needs no great experience to realize that it is the selfishness and indifference of Catholics that is one

of the greatest obstacles to others seeing the Light of Christ.

But even more. We are not only to be filled with Christ's light, we are to be glorified by it, sharing in the joy of His own glory. And therefore, to give us courage in our Lenten battle, on the Second Sunday of Lent, the Church shows us Christ in His glory, giving us the Gospel of the Transfiguration with which Christ strengthened three of His Apostles for the ordeal of His Passion.

This whole transformation from the kingdom of darkness to full participation in Christ's light is shown us and given us during the Easter Vigil. In the darkness of night, a new fire is kindled, and soon the light of the Paschal Candle shines out in the dark church—the light of the Risen Christ victorious over sin and death. In the solemn procession, while we praise this Light, we ourselves are enlightened. The flame spreads from the Paschal Candle to the candles held by the priests and clergy escorting it, and from them to the candles we the laity hold. The one Light of Christ, shared by all, shines out more and more brightly through the darkness—and we all together are the means, by Him, of its shining. Then, with the whole Church “resplendent in the radiance of so great a light,” we join in praising the wonderful goodness of God to the human race, shown us in the triumph of Christ's death and Resurrection.

In the Readings, we are shown God's creation of

light first of all, the prophecy of His new creation by the light of the Risen Christ. In the second Reading, the Lord in the pillar of fire causes the waters of the Red Sea to overwhelm the enemies of His people. So the Risen Christ in His glory overwhelms the powers of evil by the waters of Baptism. And in the third Reading also, our life in the Church is described again by light. God is in our midst "in the brightness of a flaming fire in the night, and over all the glory shall be a protection."

As the climax of the Blessing of the Baptismal water, the Paschal candle is lowered into the font, showing us that it is by the fire of the Holy Spirit, given us by the Risen Christ, that this water will make those re-born in it "light in the Lord." The Baptismal ceremonies show us the gradual illumination of the candidate by the preliminary rites, until after the administration of the Sacrament, he is given the white robe and the lighted candle that show his participation in Christ's own light here on earth, the promise of his final share, if he is faithful, in the glory of Christ in heaven.

During Lent, let us prepare for the renewal of this Baptismal grace of becoming truly "light in the Lord," so that we may be His means of spreading His light in our dark and desperate world. And if we do what we can now, then when we renew our baptismal vows together in the Easter Vigil, we shall receive what we ask. "I am come to cast fire on the earth, and what will I but that it be enkindled?"

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Read the Gospel for the Wednesday of the Fourth Week in Lent. How does the blind man's receiving of his sight compare with his coming to faith in Christ. What does this Gospel teach us about the grace of faith? Does it tell us anything about Baptism?

2. Read the "Last Gospel" of the Mass (John I, 1-14), noticing how many times "light" is used. What does this passage tell us about Baptism? Is there any reference to the Transfiguration?

3. Read the prayer for the blessing of the Easter Vigil, and the "Exultet" following the procession with the Paschal candle. How can we best prepare to take part in this praise of Christ's light?

3. From Slavery to Freedom

Nobody today has any difficulty in appreciating, at least to some degree, what slavery means. We have read accounts of what it was like to live under Nazi rule, of what it is like to live in a communist world. Vicariously, at least, we have all felt something of the horror of enslavement to powers determined to change the very nature of man and to do away with the dignity of freedom that God gave to each human person. But if anyone, even Our Lord, were to tell us that we ourselves are enslaved, we would answer indignantly that we are free-born Americans—just as the Jews said, when He told them that His truth would make them free, “We are children of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any man!”

Yet if we really look at the spiritual condition of people ruled and driven by desires for pleasure, for excitement, for money, for power, we can easily see that they are slaves in the truest sense. This seems tragically clear in the case of a drug-addict or an alcoholic. But it is true to some degree of all of us, insofar as we “cannot help” our impatience, our unkindness, our self-indulgence.

For the FALL enslaved the whole human race to sin and selfishness, to the rule of the powers of evil. It is only by the Redemption which Christ brings us that we can be free—free to love God and serve Him, free to love and serve one another, free to

be truly happy and to share happiness. When we were baptized, Christ brought us from slavery to freedom, from servitude to evil to the glorious life of the children of God. But, like the Israelites freed from their slavery, we still have a hankering for "the flesh-pots of Egypt," for the seeming comforts of a life of self-indulgence. We need to learn to appreciate our freedom, we need to learn how to live the free life of God's children. We need to be continually delivered from the attacks of our spiritual enemies, who try to recapture us for the kingdom of darkness. Thus Christ will bring us through the final deliverance of Christian death to the perfect freedom of heaven.

During Lent, our very efforts to pray and fast and give alms show what slaves we are to their opposites—to unawareness of God, to self-indulgence, to self-seeking. Thus we become aware of how greatly we need Christ. And in the Lenten Masses, the Church continually strengthens our faith and confidence in Christ's power to help us. She shows us God's great deliverances of His people in the Old Testament, from slavery and exile and conquest, from sickness and death. And she shows us how Christ Himself set people free from diseases, and from the outward possession by the devil which is such a vivid picture of what sin does to the soul.

And, in many ways, but especially in the Gospel of the Third Sunday of Lent, she teaches us how we must cooperate with this grace of deliverance.

We cannot simply be freed from evil; we must be filled with Christ's life, trying to lead it with patient perseverance, humility and trust. Or, like the man in Our Lord's frightening story, our last state will be worse than our first.

In the early centuries of the Church, it was on this Sunday that the adult candidates for Baptism at the coming Easter Vigil received one of the exorcisms that are now incorporated into the Baptismal rite. These exorcisms are for the purpose of gradually freeing fallen children of Adam from the power of Satan, and of giving them the grace with which to freely renounce the devil and to profess allegiance to Christ before receiving the Sacrament. Similarly we now prepare for the renewal of the renunciation of Satan which we shall make when we repeat our Baptismal vows at the Easter Vigil. In this Gospel Our Lord solemnly warns us that we must personally cooperate with His grace, we must really desire to be freed from the slavery of our sins and imperfections. We must really desire to serve Christ with our whole hearts.

The most complete picture of the meaning of the Redemption given us in Holy Scripture is the deliverance of the Hebrews from their slavery in Egypt to their life as God's chosen people on the other side of the Red Sea. The liturgy constantly refers to this picture to help us understand the wonders of what Christ does for us, but it is given us in a special way on Good Friday and on Holy

Saturday. On Good Friday, in the "Reproaches" said during the Adoration of the Cross, Our Lord uses the images of what He did for His people during the Exodus, and their return to Him in His Passion, to describe for us what He does for us in the Sacraments, and what we do to Him in return by our sins. And then, in the praise of Christ's Light at the Easter Vigil, the Exodus again is used to describe Christ's victory over sin by His Passion and Death and Resurrection, the victory in which we partake by Baptism.

Let us take part in Lent, then, so wholeheartedly that the Reproaches of Good Friday will really reach our souls, so that we shall be ready to renounce evil with all our strength when we renew our baptismal promises, and to rise to a new life, free "with the freedom wherewith Christ has made us free."

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Read the Second Reading in the Liturgical Service of Good Friday. How does it refer to Christ's Passion and Death? To Baptism?

2. Read the "Reproaches"—how does each refer to the sacraments and our life in the Church? What kinds of sins we commit are referred to by the incidents of the Passion?

3. Read the "Exultet" in the Easter Vigil. What do the references from Exodus show us about our Redemption? (For a fuller understanding of the Holy Week and Easter liturgy, it would be well to read the whole account of the Exodus, at least Chapters 11-17).

4. Home to the City of God

When we are tired and things are not going well, all of us are willing to admit that life on earth is an exile. Even the most cheerful and well-adjusted have seasons when they feel something of the bewilderment, the strangeness, the sense of not belonging, the lack of the security of affection given and received, which make the refugee's life so uniquely painful. And, of course, we are meant to feel this way, at least now and then, so that we may realize that life on earth is not the true life for which God made us.

But most of us feel strange and unloved and insecure in loving in a way that is entirely unnecessary for Christians. When we were baptized, Christ brought us home to the Father, and gave us the very Spirit of Love, Who is in the souls of all our brethren, uniting us in the bonds of God's own Love. We are meant to have the joy of being at home in the Church on earth while awaiting the full gladness of our final home-coming to heaven. If we felt something of the security of affection, the joy of "belonging" in the City of God that is ours by right even here and now, then we could share with others the overflowing affection of Christ, we would make them desire to be of our fellowship—and we should be much happier ourselves.

In the liturgy, the Church often uses the words of the prophets to describe the Redemption as the great

home-coming of God's people, scattered all over the earth in punishment for their sins. And in the Lesson for the Wednesday in the Fourth Week of Lent, we are told how this home-coming is to be accomplished. "I will pour cleansing streams over you . . . I will give you a new heart and breathe and a new spirit into you . . . So shall you make your home in the land I gave your fathers."

Our Lenten efforts, then, are to prepare us for the renewal of our baptismal home-coming to God, the beginning of our eternal home-coming to heaven. And in the middle of Lent, on Laetare or "Rejoice" Sunday, the Church tells us to raise our eyes to the joy of our life in the City of God, and to be glad that God's goodness is making it truly and ever-freshly ours.

The Introit of this Mass sings: "Rejoice, O Jerusalem . . . What great joy when they said to me, We go to the house of the Lord . . ." In the Old Testament, the Ark of the Covenant on Mt. Sion in Jerusalem was the place of God's Presence with His People, Jerusalem was the City of God, the true home of all true Jews. St. Paul tells us in the Epistle of this Mass that our mother is the heavenly Jerusalem, the Church, of which the earthly city with all its associations, was only the "type," the God-given picture. We have God's protection all around us "as the mountains stand round about Jerusalem." We have the Presence of Christ. We have His Spirit of love, uniting us with one another and with Him.

In the Gospel for this Sunday, we are given Our Lord's own prophetic picture of the life of His City, the banquet of the Holy Eucharist. As He fed the five thousand in the desert by multiplying the loaves and fishes, so He nourishes us with His own Body and Blood. In the Old Testament, the life which God was to give His people when he brought them home from exile, the life into which the Messias, the promised King, would introduce them, is described in terms of a banquet, abundance of food and drink, a feast, a wedding-feast. And so we are told in this Gospel that after He had fed the five thousand, they said "Beyond doubt, this is the prophet who is to come into the world," and they intended to take Jesus and make Him King,—for feeding people miraculously was just the kind of thing they expected the Messias to do.

But Our Lord meant this miracle only as a picture of the far greater miracle of His feeding mankind by the Holy Eucharist. Here is the true "Bread from heaven," which gives life to the world. Here is the true feast, of which all human companionship and its celebrations are only faint pictures. In the wedding-banquet of Holy Communion, we are united with Christ and with one another in His own security and joy. And this is the foretaste and the pledge of the eternal feast of heaven in which "God will be all in all."

As Lent and Passion-time go on, we shall find ourselves often referred to as God's household, His

family. And this phrase strikes us with special force in the poignant prayer repeated during Holy Week: "Look down, O Lord, we pray Thee, on this Thy family, for which Our Lord Jesus Christ did not hesitate to be betrayed into the hands of sinners, and to undergo the torment of the Cross." Let us, then, prepare, as true members of His family, to go with Him to His sufferings and death, and at Easter He will give us in fullness the joy of the true home-life that He has won for us, the life of the City of God.

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Read the Lesson for the Saturday before Passion Sunday. How does this refer to our life in the Church?

2. How does the Third Reading in the Easter Vigil?

3. The Good Shepherd Psalm (22) is used by the Church as a picture of Baptism, Confirmation and the Holy Eucharist. Comment on it in this light.

5. From Self-Seeking to Love

The vital current of the life Christ gives us in the Church is, as we all know, the love of God, flowing from Christ to us, out to our neighbors and so back to God. And we are only truly living Christ's life to the extent to which we are charged by this force, immersed in the current, so that it is the integrating force of all that we are and do. To become "light in the Lord," to be free with Christ's freedom, to be at home in God's City all mean living His life of love.

For love is the reason why the Father sent His Son to suffer and die for our sins. Love is the reason why Christ laid down His life for our sins. Love is the great gift he came to give us. And love is the "fulfilling of the law," the only way by which we can receive and respond to God's love. When we were baptized, we were given the Love of God, the Holy Spirit Himself; Confirmation gave us a new outpouring of His grace to make God's love the integrating force of all our actions. Whenever we receive Holy Communion, we receive Christ Himself binding us to Himself and to one another in love. But, as experience shows us more and more clearly year by year, to "order our lives in charity upon the model that Christ gave us" means the complete and continual re-orientation of our fallen human nature.

During Lent, therefore, the Church prepares us for the renewal of the grace of Baptism by teaching us how to love, and by offering us the grace to do so

more fully than ever before. And her teaching is most practical. She tells us what love does. In the first part of Lent, we are shown the basic requirements of natural justice and mercy as the prerequisites for God's friendship. In the Epistles of the first three Sundays of Lent, St. Paul tells us what Christian living means, mainly in terms of how we are to treat one another. And in the Gospels, Our Lord tells us that relieving one another's needs is the basic condition for entering heaven; that we are to be perfect in lavish selfless self-giving as our heavenly Father is perfect.

But as soon as we try to take Christ's teaching seriously, and begin to make the selfless service of others for God's love the main motive of daily life, we begin to see how impossible it is for us to do this by ourselves. Because of the Fall and our own habits of sinfulness and selfishness, we are sick and crippled. By ourselves we do not have the vitality, the control, the skill to be active in radiating Christ's love to others. So the Lessons and Gospels of Lent give us many pictures of the wonderful miracles of healing wrought by God through His prophets in the Old Testament, wrought by Christ Himself in the New. For these show us what Christ does for us in Baptism and will do for us again and again in the Sacrament of Penance, and in Holy Communion.

If we go through Lent trying to practice the lessons in Christian love that the Church gives us, and daily learning more fully our own weakness and Christ's

strength, we shall be prepared to take part in the re-enactment of the Last Supper on Holy Thursday, the day on which Christ gave us His great teaching, example, proof and gift of His love for us and His Father.

At the Last Supper Our Lord told the Apostles that He was about to lay down His life out of love for the Father and mankind. At the Last Supper He offered His suffering and death in thanksgiving and love to the Father, in the form of a ritual action, the offering of bread and wine. And He gave His Apostles the power to re-enact His offering, in this ritual action, and to hand on their power to others, so that His followers could be united with Him in His offering until the end of time. Moreover, He gave us His Body and Blood thus offered to be the Food of His life in us. And it was at the Last Supper also that He gave us His new commandment, "that you should love one another as I have loved you."

Every Mass, of course, re-presents His offering and His sacrifice, and gives us the supreme pledge of His love, His Body and Blood in Holy Communion. But the Mass of Holy Thursday calls special attention to this and the Gospel makes present for us Christ's own demonstration of how we are to fulfill His New Command in ordinary daily life. (The ceremony of the Washing of the Feet, now to be carried out, when feasible, after the Gospel, is the presentation of this example before our eyes.)For few of us are given the opportunity to lay down our lives for

Christ and for one another all at once, in one splendid action of self-sacrifice. But all of us have the opportunity to do so by means of the daily service of others, spending ourselves in humble, considerate, selfless self-spending to serve one another's physical and mental and spiritual needs. We are to "wash one another's feet," that is, to do whatever needs doing for one another, however lowly or costly such effort may be—and so we will lay down our lives, following Christ's example.

Let us, then, so spend our Lent in practicing this selfless service that on Holy Thursday Our Lord may be able to give us a new share in His own love and in the joy that it brings with it. "The love of Christ has gathered us together—let us be glad and rejoice in Him."

Suggestions for Discussion

1. From the readings of the Lenten Masses, make a list of what Christians are told to do and not to do in their relations with others. How can you carry this program out more fully in daily life?

2. Read Our Lord's discourse at the Last Supper in the Gospel of St. John. How often does He mention the love we should have for one another?

3. Read the Antiphons and Prayers that are sung in connection with the Washing of the Feet. What do these tell us about Christian living?

6. Through Suffering to Joy

During Lent, we have been following Christ in His prayer and fasting and self-spending for others, so as to be ready to follow Him during Holy Week through His Passion and Death to the glory of His Resurrection. On Palm Sunday, the last stage of our journey begins. By taking part in the solemn Procession, we publicly pledge our faith and loyalty to Our Lord as He goes to suffer and die for us. We pledge our faith that He will truly rise victorious over sin and death. We pledge ourselves loyally to follow Him on the way of His Passion and Death.

But how are we to follow Him? The Church shows us how and enables us to do so in the Masses and other solemn liturgical services of Holy Week. The Prayer for Palm Sunday lays out the way: "Almighty and everlasting God, as Thou didst have our Savior take on a human body and undergo the agony of the Cross as an example of humility for mankind to imitate, grant that we may learn the lessons of His Passion and share in His Resurrection."

We are, therefore, to follow His example of humility and to "learn the lessons of His Passion." And this means that we are, by the liturgy above all, to try to follow Him in His sufferings with true "sympathy." To be mere spectators of His Passion would be monstrous. We must somehow, like Our Lady, try to participate in it. And to make it possible for us to do so, the Liturgy gives us the outward

events of the Passion and also, by the inspired words of psalms, prophecies and Gospels, communicates to us Our Lord's thoughts and feelings in His suffering, so that we may begin to enter into them. And, above all, the Liturgy gives us the sacramental re-enactment of His Passion and Death, especially in the Solemn Services of Good Friday, so that we may take part in it with Him and be conformed to Him in His sufferings.

First, as the Palm Sunday Prayer tells us, we are to learn and share in Christ's humility. Humility means recognition and acceptance of what one is. When the Son of God took upon Himself our human nature, He, the Sinless One, made Himself the head of our sinful human race. He took upon Himself the burden of our sins. And so He accepted the suffering that is the effect and the punishment of sin: "He was wounded for our iniquities, He was bruised for our sins." How much more, then, should we humbly accept the unavoidable suffering that comes to us as the due punishment of our own sinfulness and of that of the human race to which we belong?

But we are also to enter into Christ's loving *obedience*. "He was offered because He Himself was willing." But this was not the natural desire of His human will, it was because He made Himself obedient to His Father: "Thy Will be done, not Mine." And the motive for the Father's command and the Son's obedience was love: "By His bruises, we are healed." As His members, by His grace, we

can share not only in His humble acceptance of suffering, but in His free and loving obedience to His Father's will, and so we can make our sufferings share in the redemptive power of His own.

Yet, as the Liturgy shows us, Our Lord endured all the human reactions to suffering which are not opposed to this humility and obedience—dismay, bewilderment, fear. He tells us of mental suffering at the ingratitude of His people, the betrayal of Judas, His abandonment by His friends. We should realize that we ourselves have contributed to His sufferings by our betrayals of His love, our abandonment of Him in His needy members, our ingratitude for our redemption. Yet surely, we may believe that Our Lord means the communication of His sufferings to us in the liturgy as one great proof of His friendship, not only to make us truly sorry for our sins, but to give us the opportunity to be one with Him in His sufferings, so that He may be one with us in ours.

And, above all, He desires to have us enter into His perfect trust in His Father. This is the most constant theme of the Holy Week liturgy: prayer for deliverance from His enemies, for rescue from suffering, and perfect trust that the Father will answer His prayer.

During Holy Week let us try, reverently and humbly, to give Our Lord the understanding and appreciation of His sufferings which the Liturgy will give us if we enter into it. Let us ask Our Lady for some share in that full "sympathy" which was hers

with her Son. "We adore Thy Cross, O Lord, and we praise and glorify Thy holy resurrection; for behold, by the wood of the Cross came joy into the whole world."

Suggestions for Discussion

1. Read Psalm 21 (used in the Tract for the Second Sunday in Passiontime, recited in full during the stripping of the altar on Holy Thursday). How many times is this quoted in the Gospels of the Passion? How is it fulfilled in the Passion and its effects?

2. Read the Response before the reading of the Passion on Good Friday. How is this appropriate to the day on which we celebrate the mystery of Our Lord's suffering and death?

3. Why is it especially fitting that the Church should retain the Solemn Prayers after the Readings (once included in every Mass) in the liturgical service of Good Friday?

7. From Death to Life

Our Lord Himself summed up all that He had come to give mankind in the one word "Life." Sharing in this Life was, above all, what being a Christian meant to the Apostles and to their first followers; this is what being a Christian should mean to us. Christ brought new life into the world, eternal life, a life so real and vital that, in comparison, any merely human living can be called death, as it leads to death. The themes running through Lent and Eastertide are all various aspects of this great Good News of the life Christ has brought us. Newness, light, redemption from slavery, salvation from our spiritual enemies, freedom, health, home-coming, companionship, peace, joy—His life is all this, in a fullness and aliveness beyond imagining.

During Lent the Church prepares us to believe with new faith and hope that Christ will truly give us this Life, telling us of the miracles of raising the dead wrought by the prophets in the Old Testament and by Our Lord Himself in the New. For these are signs, pictures made by God Himself, of what Christ does for us in the Sacraments of Baptism and Penance, of how He gives us, or renews in us, His life.

We all look forward in some way to living this life after death. But most of us do not live our Christian life here and now with the joy and courage that we might, because we do not realize, as did the first Christians, that we share in this Life here and

now. Physical death will only be a secondary "passing over," introducing us into a second stage of this one life, before the general resurrection finally gives us to the perfect and eternal possession of it. But we made the great transition from death to life when we were baptized.

Our own experience tells us that the price of new life, or of a new kind of life, even on the human level, has to be some kind of death. We have to die to some less perfect kind of life in order to receive a new one. Adolescence is a kind of dying to the life of childhood and a birth to maturity. Marriage means a kind of death to a single life, and the beginning of something quite new. Living a truly dedicated life of any kind means dying to many other interests and possibilities.

All these are shadows of the great death and separation which we must go through in order to live the life that Christ brings us, the Life of God. He won this Life for us by His death on the Cross. His soul was separated from His body, and went down to "hell," to the shadowy world of the dead which was the best after-life possible before He had conquered sin and death by His dying. So He won the victory over death, He "harrowed hell" and brought the souls of the just up to share His risen life in heaven. And by Baptism, we also share in His death and His rising again. He died for sin. We must die to sin: "the imitation of Christ's death and resurrection is effected in an image, but salva-

tion in reality.” And the best way of describing this mystery is the one given us by the Sacrament itself. We are immersed, plunged into Christ’s death, by the baptismal water, to arise with Him to new life.

God made water by its nature to be both death-dealing and life-giving. Seas and lakes and rivers and rain can drown us or destroy us, yet water is essential for life as we know it. So human language, and Holy Scripture use water-images as the pictures of great sorrow and affliction as well as of cleanliness, refreshment and delight. And Holy Scripture shows us how, throughout sacred history, God used this element of water in His great works for His people, particularly in the creation, the Flood and the Exodus. Our Lord Himself was baptized in the Jordan “to sanctify the waters of the whole world” for Baptism, and He caused water and blood to flow from His side on the Cross, to show us that it is by Baptism and the Holy Eucharist that we share in His life-giving death.

“But since . . . we have been buried with Christ by Baptism which immerses us in His death: so, as Christ has risen from the dead, we also should live with a new life, knowing that the sinful man which we used to be has been crucified with Christ in order that we might no longer be slaves of sin.”

Holy Saturday is the time for mourning after the Good Friday celebration of His death. We should try to share something of Our Lady’s quiet and faith, for she was the only one on earth, on the first Holy

Saturday, who fully believed that her Son would rise again.

Then, at the Easter Vigil, "on this most holy night, our holy Mother the Church keeps loving watch in memory of the death and burial of Our Lord Jesus Christ; and she rejoices with great happiness in the celebration of His glorious Resurrection." After welcoming and praising the new Light of Christ, risen victorious from the darkness of death, we hear the four Readings that describe our life in the Church. Then the baptismal water is blessed, not only to provide the material for the Sacrament, but to teach us by this beautiful blessing, the wonders of Baptism and the life it gives us. And after Baptism has been administered, we all renew our baptismal renunciation of sin and our pledge of allegiance to Christ, so that our Risen Lord may communicate to us the full joy and vitality of His life. For "We have died to sin and we are to live for God, in Christ Jesus our Lord." And the first Mass of Easter brings us all together in the joyful celebration of the great act of that life—Christ's Sacrifice of praise. "This is the day the Lord has made, let us be glad and rejoice in it."

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